

One body? Bishops to continue debate over Eucharistic document at fall assembly

It won't be on the agenda, but it will dominate the meeting anyway. When the U.S. bishops gather for their fall general assembly, the big issue before them [will be unity](#). And not unity with somebody else but among themselves.

What threatens to divide them are conflicting views on the Church's preeminent sacrament of unity, the Eucharist – specifically, who can worthily receive holy Communion and who cannot.

That isn't new. At their Nov. 15-18 meeting in Baltimore, the bishops will resume a debate that exploded publicly at their general assembly in June. Then, as now, the question dividing them was whether to say Catholic politicians who support abortion – a group notably including President Joe Biden – should be refused Communion unless they change their minds and repent.

Some bishops think the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops should say that, others are convinced it shouldn't.

The focal point in Baltimore will be a statement on the “meaning of the Eucharist in the life of the Church” prepared by the USCCB Committee on Doctrine, chaired [by Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades](#) of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana. After a tense two-hour debate last June, the bishops voted 168-55 with six abstentions [to move ahead on a draft](#).

But one result of that debate, together with a series of closed-door regional discussions since then, is likely to be a document with no sharp edges that would be offensive to pro-abortion politicians or anybody else. Instead, the statement

is expected to stress the positive and avoid singling out politicians for criticism or suggesting that abortion is the only measure of worthiness to receive the sacrament. It will also reaffirm that the decision in particular cases is up to individual bishops rather than USCCB.

Almost certainly, though, the meeting's main point of interest will be what the statement on the Eucharist says or doesn't say about prominent Catholic pro-choicers like Biden. Since June, the president and his administration have continued their high-visibility support for abortion. Most recently, that included removing a ban on giving family planning funds to abortion providers, a policy that cost Planned Parenthood, the nation's largest abortion provider, nearly \$60 million yearly.

In September, Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory of Washington, who opposes denying Communion to Biden, nevertheless challenged the president on a key point of Catholic doctrine. The president had said human life doesn't begin at conception, but the cardinal reminded a National Press Club audience that the Church teaches that it does; he added that Biden was ["not demonstrating Catholic teaching"](#) in saying differently.

But by far the most significant abortion-related development on the Church's side in recent months was Pope Francis' [in-flight news conference](#), also in September, while returning to Rome from a visit to Hungary and Slovakia. Asked about the debate in the U.S. over giving Communion to pro-abortion politicians, the pope gave a typically freewheeling reply open to various interpretations.

Declining to comment specifically on events in America, he nevertheless took a notably strong stand against abortion, calling it "homicide" and saying that for the Church to accept it "would be like accepting daily murder."

At the same time, however, he insisted that bishops should

adopt a “pastoral” approach on Communion for pro-choicers and “not go around condemning.”

Finally, though, he dismissed as “a hypothetical” the conclusion that a pastoral approach necessarily meant giving Communion. “The pastor knows what he has to do at all times, but as a shepherd,” he concluded.

Having had five months to think things over, the bishops are likely to seek to soften the sometimes confrontational tone that marked their debate in June, threatening to shatter the appearance of collegial consensus much prized by the hierarchy. Students of the episcopal conference know bishops have been divided before on issues, to say nothing of conflicting styles and personalities. But it would be hard to recall a previous occasion when they disagreed quite so publicly as they do now.

In that context, many people will be waiting to see what line particular members of the hierarchy with a special stake in the outcome will take during the debate in Baltimore.

That includes, on one side, Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann of Kansas City, Kansas, chairman of USCCB’s pro-life committee, and Archbishop Salvatore J. Cordileone of San Francisco, who has clashed publicly with Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, a pro-abortion Catholic from his archdiocese, and on the other side Cardinal Blase J. Cupich of Chicago and Bishop Robert W. McElroy of San Diego, both of whom have strongly opposed denying Communion.

Also closely watched will be what USCCB president Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles says in his opening remarks. As much as anyone, after all, Archbishop Gomez got this particular ball rolling last January with an Inauguration Day statement sharply critical of the newly elected Catholic president’s support for abortion.

It hardly needs saying, too, that Pope Francis’ views will

carry important weight with the bishops. If he has said any more than he did on the plane in September, it has been said privately and out of sight. Bishops and everybody else will therefore be listening carefully for any further indications in the talk traditionally delivered at the start of a bishops' meeting by Archbishop Christophe Pierre, the papal Nuncio to the United States.

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What else to expect

The statement on the Eucharist is by no means the only issue facing the bishops. Among other things, they will have to elect a new general secretary of the conference – a task made necessary by the resignation last July of Msgr. Jeffrey Burrill following media reports that analysis of cellphone data had traced calls to a homosexual “hookup” app to his number. The choice to succeed him is expected to be Msgr. Michael Fuller, a priest of the Diocese of Rockford, Ill., who has been serving as interim general secretary.

The agenda for the meeting is also expected to include details on the national Eucharistic Congress planned for 2024. The bishops will also vote for a treasurer-elect for the conference, as well as chairmen-elect of five conference committees: Clergy, Consecrated Life, and Vocations; Divine Worship; Domestic Justice and Human Development; Laity, Marriage, Family Life, and Youth; and Migration.